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## ON TEACHING THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD IN FRENCH

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THE subjunctive mood presents a difficult problem of language instruction. To students taking intermediate college French, or third year school French, the subjunctive is, as a rule, a maze into which they have not ventured to penetrate far, or in which they have lost their way. An appreciative understanding of the subjunctive is a rare exception.

The subject is approached in different ways according to the general method of language teaching employed. In some classes the pupil is expected to gain familiarity with the subjunctive by observing its use in the French text and attempting to account for each case as it comes up; or he may be required to learn a good number of sentences involving the subjunctive and thus become familiar with its use. My experience has been that students so trained are usually among those who have lost their way. By the first method, the pupil does not get a clear idea of the material with which he is working, because it is presented in such fragmentary form. By the second method, he uses too much imitation and too little reasoning to master a difficult subject which demands intelligent comprehension. However, either or both of these methods, if modified as I shall indicate further on, might give excellent results.

On the other hand, classes which study the subject solely by means of grammar rules fall easily into evil ways, often through the fault of their instructors. A student trained by this method can often state a rule correctly without being able to apply it with any degree of accuracy in writing or speaking. The emphasis is placed more on memorizing the rule than on understanding the case which the rule covers. In two grammars quite widely used in school classes a list of cases requiring the subjunctive is set down, with no attempt to explain or analyze them. The pupil must swallow the mass and then see if it will somehow digest. Other popular grammars which I have examined are better or

worse in this respect, but few indeed give any consideration to the subject from the point of view which I am going to suggest.

After all, successful teaching of the subjunctive mood depends more on the instructor than on the general method or the book. I firmly believe in teaching the rules of the French language as far as possible by determining and indicating to the class the reasons back of the rules. At first, the teacher must do practically all of this; later, the pupils themselves will apply much more reason and much less sheer memory to their work, and a great advantage will be gained, not only for the subject matter of one class, but for the whole course of education. If this principle is carried out, even the teacher may be surprised to discover how few rules there are which cannot be explained on some reasonable basis.

In presenting the subjunctive to an intermediate class I generally have to correct a fatal error in the minds of the pupils, namely, that certain words, or groups of words, can produce a subjunctive form in a following verb. Why an expression of wishing or a conjunction of condition should possess this magic power the pupil does not know, and the whole force of the subjunctive is, therefore, lost to him. The cause of this error can be easily found in many of the drill books and grammars. One book introduces a very inadequate treatment of the subject with this remark: "*The subjunctive mood is used in French usually because of some word or expression that precedes.*" When several grammars state explicitly that the subjunctive is required after an impersonal verb, is it any wonder that the ideas of the pupils are confused? If we apply the rule as stated, it means that "*Il est possible que . . .*," "*Il est probable que . . .*," and "*Il est certain que . . .*" all require a subjunctive. But that is nonsense.

It is convenient and desirable to classify the uses of the subjunctive, as is done in most grammars, according to the nature of the expression which precedes. It is perfectly reasonable that the pupil should be shown that the subjunctive forms rarely appear except after certain kinds of expressions. It must be made unmistakably plain, however, that these expressions are never the origin but merely the indication of the following subjunctive form.

Before making a study of any specific uses of the subjunctive, I should get the class to see that subjunctive and indicative depend

on the direction of thought or the mental attitude of the speaker. That is the fundamental idea which most pupils seem to miss completely. I have found only one book in common use in which that idea is brought out clearly at the start, and even in that book the matter is dismissed with far too little emphasis. In several other books a remark or two on the general distinction between subjunctive and indicative can be found, but stated in such general terms or printed so inconspicuously that the pupil cannot be expected to know that therein lies the key to the subject.

An English sentence may sometimes be rendered in French with either a subjunctive or an indicative form of the verb, according to the sense. Shades of meaning and variations in attitude or point of view, expressed in French by indicative and subjunctive, are often obscure or entirely lost in English, and are, therefore, very difficult for American pupils to grasp:

J'espère qu'il *viendra*  
Je crains qu'il ne *vienne*

Il est probable qu'il *partira*  
Est-il probable qu'il *parte*?

Je ne crois pas qu'il *soit* ici  
Il ne croit pas que je *suis* ici

C'est le seul ami que j'*aie*  
C'est la seule chose qu'il *a dite*

Such cases as these are bewildering if found in a text or studied as dogmatically stated rules and exceptions to rules. It is only as the pupil considers the different attitudes on the part of the speaker that he begins to see light.

What are, then, the principal ideas, attitudes, and feelings which a Frenchman communicates by means of the subjunctive mood? They may be classed in four groups:

- I     Doubt
- II    Will
- III   Favorable or Unfavorable Judgment
- IV    Emotion

A somewhat similar grouping is given in several grammars, but it is made to apply only to substantive clauses. I do not claim

that all possible uses of the subjunctive can be accounted for in this classification, but I think that nearly all the cases are covered.

Doubt, in one form or another, explains the largest number of rules of the subjunctive. There are expressions which definitely state a doubt, such as, "Je doute qu'il vienne," "Je ne suis pas sûr que ce soit vrai." Again, doubt or uncertainty, though not explicitly stated, is sufficiently prominent in the mind of the speaker to cause the use of a subjunctive form. If we say, "Il est probable qu'il partira," we indicate, both by the words, "Il est probable," and still more forcibly by the future, "partira," that we personally expect him to go. But we must regard very differently the probability of his going if we say, "Est-il probable qu'il parte?" or, "Il est possible qu'il parte."

It must be remembered that the actual facts in a case referred to have nothing to do with the choice of the verb form; only the thought of the person speaking can determine that. If I say, "Je ne crois pas qu'il *soit* ici," it makes no difference whether he is actually here or not; the point is that I am not sure of it. The force of the indicative is then evident in, "Il ne croit pas que je *suis* ici," for I, the speaker, know perfectly well that I am here.

If I turn the sentence, "Je crois que *c'est* lui," so as to make it negative (Je ne crois pas que ce *soit* lui), or interrogative (Croyez-vous que ce *soit* lui?), I am evidently in doubt about the matter; but if I make the sentence negative and interrogative (Ne croyez-vous pas que *c'est* lui?), I have a definite opinion, I expect an affirmative answer, and I show my attitude by using an indicative form. If the pupil's attention is fixed on mere words, it is hard for him to see why, if a negative or an interrogative in these sentences produces a subjunctive form, a negative-interrogative should not do the same.

Again, if the pupil thinks of the subjunctive as produced by "some word or expression that precedes," the distinction between "Il semble que . . .," and "Il me semble que . . ." may seem to him a matter of splitting hairs, but if he considers only the point of view of the speaker, he can readily see that these two similar expressions indicate, respectively, two very different attitudes. In the first, the speaker is giving something like hearsay evidence, about which he is not at all sure; in the second, he is stating his personal opinion very much as though he said, "Je crois que. . ."

The force of analogy must be taken into account in almost any study of language, and apparently it has had some influence on the subjunctive mood. The concessive tone of the expression, "Qui que vous *soyez*," implies an attitude which might be expressed by, "I don't know exactly who you are." The same concessive tone is in certain conjunctions, such as "quoique," "bien que," etc., which introduce a subjunctive form in an adverbial clause. The element of doubt is still evident, perhaps, in "Bien qu'il *soit* parti," but in some expressions of this sort the subjunctive of doubt is not so evident unless we trace it from the more obvious cases. Similarly, in the use of the subjunctive with conjunctions of time, such as "avant que," "jusqu'à ce que," etc., the obvious cases are those in which the action expressed by the subjunctive verb is still in the future and, therefore, indefinite and uncertain.

Teachers of English language often advise their pupils to use with great caution the superlative and expressions of superlative force, and there is very good reason for this advice. If we say, "This is the most beautiful scene I ever saw," "He is the best friend I have," "That is the only thing I can tell you," etc., we know that we are often making statements which are not literally true. In French the subjunctive indicates, with a nicety impossible in English, an instinctive and probably unconscious hesitation in using expressions of superlative force. If the pupil once gets this idea, he will understand even such odd uses of the subjunctive as, "Je ne *sache* rien de plus beau."

One case involving an element of doubt, in which young pupils find great difficulty, is described as follows in one of the best reference grammars: "when purpose regarding the antecedent, or unattained result is implied." I have yet to meet an intermediate class that could form any clear idea from that statement. But if we emphasize the indefiniteness of "way" in the sentence, "Show me the way which leads to knowledge," contrasting it with the definiteness of "road" in, "Show me the road which leads to the town," the force of the subjunctive becomes apparent, and the pupil can make an intelligent selection of the verb form when a similar case comes up.

If, now, we steadily increase the element of doubt and carry it to its logical conclusion, we arrive finally at the point of denial and negation. Here several other uses of the subjunctive are

accounted for. If the pupil thinks of denial as the extreme form of doubt, he will find a reason for the distinction between, "J'affirme qu'il *est* riche," and "Je nie qu'il *soit* riche." Furthermore, he can see some connection between the subjunctive in an adjectival clause in such a sentence as, "Il n'a pas de raison qui *vaille*," and the subjunctive in an adverbial clause after conjunctions of negative force, such as "non que," "sans que," etc. He may even discover similarity between "Il n'a pas de raison qui *vaille*" and the expressions of superlative force.

In the second group, some form of wish causes the subjunctive to appear. "Il désire que . . .," "Il préfère que . . .," etc., are obvious cases. "Éviter" and "prendre garde" merely reflect a wish from a different angle. If the same principle is applied here that I indicated for the expressions of doubt, we come, by a perfectly logical step, to commanding, forbidding, etc. When the pupil recognizes the mental attitude back of "J'ordonne qu'il parte," he will easily understand why the subjunctive is used as a third person imperative, "Qu'il parte," though the English version of these sentences would show little connection between the two. It is easier for the pupil to understand that "Ainsi *soit*-il," or "Vive le roi" reflects a wish in the mind of the speaker but not expressed, than to learn that case as a separate rule, or to regard the subjunctive form as produced by a *verb* of wishing which is absent.

It will not be necessary for me to discuss in detail groups III and IV, especially as they are much simpler than the cases with which I have been dealing. I will merely point out that, in group III, "Il est bien," "Il est important," "Il est essentiel," "Il est nécessaire" ("Il faut"), represent stages of favorable judgment. The frequently used expressions of necessity should not, therefore, be set down as an isolated class, as is done in several grammars.

Because of the difficulty of the subject as it is commonly presented, a comprehensive view of the subjunctive field is withheld until the pupil has reached an advanced part of the course. This is unfortunate and unnecessary. The four motivating forces of the subjunctive—doubt, will, favorable or unfavorable judgment, emotion—can be introduced much earlier, and, when these have been explained and illustrated, all individual cases, as they are added, will fit into the regular scheme. Some good, lively exer-

cises will then quickly develop intelligent and accurate use of the fascinating but elusive subjunctive mood. It may be hardly necessary to add that the general method of approach which I have tried to indicate here for the subjunctive will clear the way through many another bit of difficult terrain in French grammar.

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